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ABSTRACT

The writing program at the University of California at Santa Barbara offers a class for junior and senior art history or studio majors or film studies majors, although it attracts students from other related fields such as communications. It is specifically goal oriented and works best with students who have a knowledge of the arts. The class is not about art but concentrates on those writing skills that will impact most clearly on the students' future careers as artists, specifically in the areas of: reviews, brochures and catalogs, resumes, personal statements, cover letters, and grant proposals. The course is hands-on, with each assignment considered from a real world perspective. While expository essay is not emphasized, the course focuses on those aspects of writing usually found in a writing class, such as demands of audience, use of concrete examples, focus, critical analysis, expository writing, development of ideas, and editing. A central section of the course, devoted to audience, looks at the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, the controversial photographer. Also included is David Ogilvy's "How to Write Potent Copy," examined for its content and comments on advertising. A final project asks students to create something artistic that contains writing. Students without fail have responded to the exercise with enthusiasm. They must write a contract that details the nature of the work, dates for submission of each section, etc. Items created have included brochures, CD covers, calendars, and how-to booklets. (CR)

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ED 402 587

EXPANDING THE HORIZON: WRITING FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

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"Expanding the Horizon: Writing for the Visual Arts

At the University of California, Santa Barbara, the Writing Program offers a class entitled "Writing for the Visual Arts" aimed at Juniors and Seniors who are Art Studio and Art History majors as well as Film Studies majors, though the course also attracts a smattering of students from other related fields like Communications. I consider this course a "gem," one that gives students a real feel for the outside world, for their role as artists in it and an opportunity to produce work that incorporates writing and artistic achievement and yet can be used in a very practical way by them when applying for jobs in their field. The more "mature" the student in terms of their own development as an artist the more they can bring to the class. It works best with a group of students who have a knowledge of the arts, as it is very specifically goal-oriented. The class is not about art but teaches how to write about it.

Indeed, what makes this class so wonderful is that the teacher works with artists who already think creatively and imaginatively and this class gives them an opportunity to expand their horizons and learn how to sell themselves as artists. While effective in their chosen medium, artists do not necessarily have the written skills that they will need to promote their work. For this reason, the course concentrates on those writing skills that will impact most clearly on the students' (future) careers as artists, specifically in the areas of:

i) reviews; ii) brochures and catalogs; iii) resumes, personal statements and cover letters; iv) and grant proposals. This course gives them a sense of what is required in terms of the projects and/or activities they will need as they enter their chosen professional careers. Of particular importance are such items as a "philosophical statement" which asks them to articulate their artistic credo or the writing of a brochure that talks about their work or a review that asks them to discuss other works of art. The course is conceived as "hands-on," with each assignment considered from a "real world" perspective.

Since it is an upper division class, the more standard expository essay is not emphasised as this element will have been covered in a Freshman composition class. The only other restriction is on "creative" writing--no short stories, movie scripts etc.--as the aims of this course are to write material geared toward a specific kind of audience (committees, viewers of art, John and Jane Q. Public) from whom the students will be trying to get attention and/or money. At the same time, the course emphasises those aspects of writing that are usually found in a writing class, such as the demands of audience, use of concrete examples, focus, critical analysis, expository writing, development of ideas and editing as well as aspects of paragraphing, sentence structure and grammar but in this instance more particularly focussed on the special needs and demands of artists.

1.The first assignment consists of three parts:

a) A one page **PERSONAL RESUME** which may be "generic" or "job specific."

ii) a one page **LETTER OF APPLICATION** for a specific job. Students must attach the job description of application to the letter. The letter must be addressed to the teacher of the class --as s/he is the prospective employer.

iii) a one page **PERSONAL ARTIST STATEMENT** regarding the student's attitude and qualifications concerning their chosen field.

The course pack contains examples of all three assignments and considerable class time is spent looking at examples. Each student is also required to REVISE the material at least twice with input from peers and the teacher. Proof reading is emphasised, as well as development. Students are reminded that often these documents are the most important as if these are not in order, they will not get to the interview stage. The material should present as accurate a picture of the applicant as possible with enough distinguishing features to make them "stand out from the crowd."

Comments:

This assignment is given out first and earliest as it is the one that speaks the most to the students and the one they realize they need the most.

As a rule, students write this assignment from a particularly interesting mind set. They often have a hard time filling up a page for a variety of reasons: not enough work or related

experience, do not know how to develop and expand on the ideas with concrete examples and do not realize that they will be competing with hundreds or thousands of others for the job or the award. Unintentionally, they project a air of either arrogance, ("I am wonderful, hire me") or ironically, at the other end of the spectrum, negativity, "(I am not that good but I can learn.") As regards the latter, this tone results from a desire to be honest but they often produce material that is brutally honest in a self defeating way, showing themselves "warts and all," when some discretion might be in order. The question of audience is especially important in this area.

The reason students are asked to pick a "real" job in their field is two fold: it makes them gear their writing for a specific audience. If they make up a job they can make an ideal match and they will not learn how to take the raw data and dovetail it to the specific needs of this application. Few jobs are a perfect match so this task provides a special lesson. There is also something psychological in having the students address the letter to the teacher as opposed to a box number that also helps them focus and deal with the needs of audience.

On a practical level, the exercise helps students learn what to include on a resume (addresses, email accounts, dates of work and classes taken etc.,) how to pad a short resume with relevant material, as well as lay out and format, including fonts.)

For the letter, they also learn how to lay out the material so that it fits a page, paragraphing, the use of a suitable "hook" for the opening, editing and proof reading skills.

The artist statement reveals interesting problems as

students tend to fall into a number of traps: unintentional cliches ("When I was three my kindergarten teacher told me..." or " I want to create art that changes the world"); telling the reader how to think about their work; or the aforementioned negativity either about the state of art or their own skills.

REVIEW

This particular assignment has been offered in a number of ways: a review of a show, a movie, a recording, an art show. Lately, I have decided for reasons of time and space to show a movie in class that has to do with art in some way, either a documentary or a commercial film. In recent classes, I have used the documentaries Paris is Burning and Unzipped, both of which run about 75 minutes.

The Assignment:

Review the movie shown in class along the lines of a Los Angeles Times review.

Your review should do two things: describe and have a point of view.

a) In the first par. give some sense of what you feel about the movie.

b) Then, without given away anything of the plot that would detract from another person's enjoyment, give a brief overview of the plot, no more than a par--though elements of the plot might be scattered throughout the piece.

c) Then explain why you think the piece is worthwhile viewing or should be missed or a combination of both. In other words, evaluate the piece, make a judgement about its value. Develop your argument based on reasons supported with and by the

evidence. Appropriate evidence might focus on (some but not all) aspects such as the acting, cinematography, director, scenery, special effects, music etc. etc. You might also put the film in a context. If you know something of the genre or the artists and can make some general assessment go ahead. You might also want to consider why people might not agree with your point of view. Try to temper your attitude: an all-out rave or an all-out pan will not be as effective as one that looks at the movie from a number of points of view.

In short, after reading your review, your reader should know something about the material and whether or not they want to see it. The reader should also want to know why they should trust your judgement, so you should try to show, subtly or otherwise, that you know what you are talking about, know something about the field or have skills in the area.

Remember, in theory (and perhaps in practice) your reader will not know anything about the piece and will be relying on you to convey a clear message about its value.

AUDIENCE is very important. A trite piece will not make the reader feel that you know what you are talking about and an overly serious piece might come across as pretentious. You might try a "compare and contrast" form telling what works and what doesn't but don't keep switching points of view.

Remember: This is a draft and therefore expect to rewrite, shorten or lengthen it as need be. It should contain the germ of your ideas. Be prepared to make changes as suggested by your peers. All your drafts will be expected to be REVISED. Drafts should be 1000--1250 words in length (include a word count) and

be written in columns.

Comments:

The review is the hardest for the students to write as they are used to writing more expository essays which have a different format. Reviews are more "organic" in nature and are constantly self-referential. I, therefore, use the review for a number of purposes: to make a distinction between a plot summary and an interpretation of a theme, though a plot summary is an essential ingredient in the assignment and also for editing skills. The first draft runs around 1250 words, which they then have to cut to 1000. For the next revision, they have to cut it again to 750 words but without losing any important ideas. Along with this assignment, we cover grammar, effective verbs and other ways to tighten up one's prose.

READINGS

At this point it is worthwhile to talk about the readings in the course. We are on a quarter system (10 weeks) and the class meets for 75 minutes twice a week, so there is not a lot of time for readings and therefore all the readings are selected with an eye to their maximum effectiveness. Since the class is geared towards real life situations, little time is spent on theory of art, art history or the like.

Besides examples of all the assignments, such as resumes, letters of application and statements, the class also reads reviews from different sources on the same material. The reviews are selected to show their similar approaches but also to show that the reviewers disagree on central elements (worth, ratings, execution) based on the writer's expertise, as well as authority

and sometimes personal opinion.

A central section of the course is devoted to the question of audience. The class looks at the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, the controvesial photographer. However,the intent here is not so much to judge or assess the work but to look at the different ways people write on it. As an introduction, the class reads the introduction of John Berger's text, Ways of Seeing which deals primarily with the female nude, and while Mapplethorpe deals with the male nude, the essay raises some interesting points in how we view art. We also look at a PBS special on "Verkunste Art," the so-called degenerate art exhibit that Hitler mounted in 1938 to promote his theories of purity in art. Most of these paintings denegrated are expressionistic in nature and contain some of the masterpieces of the mid twentieth century.

The class then looks at three different pieces on Mapplethorpe. A CBS report hosted by Connie Chung that aired on a Saturday night and is aimed at Middle American audience, a piece from the Chronicle of Higher Education on the banning of the travelling exhibit of Mapplethorpe's work and finally a brochure written by Edmund White the essayist from the Chicago exhibit of Mapplethorpe's work. Each piece is examined both as a piece of writing and in comparison with the others.

The course pack also includes David Ogilvy's "How to Write Potent Copy" which is examined for its content and comments on adevertising. It is an excellent article for use in editing. (If time permits the class devises a series of slogans for an imaginary advertising campaign.

GRANTS

This assignment is optional but incorporates the Artist Statement and also helps students learn how to present their material and ideas. The University has a number of grants specifically for artists and nothing is more invigorating than to have a student apply for one while in the class and win one! Simply filling out the forms and meeting deadlines is a lesson in itself for the student.

FINAL PROJECT

The final project is the most exciting and time consuming for the students but it is also the "gem" of the class. Students are asked to create something artistic that contains writing. Primarily, it calls for editing skills and very tight writing which by this stage in the class, what with editing the review and the other materials, they should be familiar with. The "secret" is to get them to match their writing and artistic skills. Some resist writing and want to do more "creative" projects. I tell them that these projects can be as creative as any other kind of work. Furthermore, it should be as close to the real needs of the artist and be something that they can use in an interview. Rather than an essay, it can show off the student's ability in several areas, not the least of which is their artistic acumen and ability. For this reason, and even though it takes an inordinate amount of time and sometimes a lot of money, students without fail have responded to the exercise with enthusiasm. The ideas come primarily from the students themselves with only "mentoring" input from the teacher. The student may pick a topic--I very rarely veto the topic, as one never knows

how imaginative the final result might be--but I will work on fine tuning it, such as in selecting some of the material to be included or giving directions of places where to find ideas.

Students are them responsible for designing the material and producing the finished product. The production often entails many hours of work as students discover that costs are prohibitive and they have to cut back on original plans or that they cannot find all the material etc. Ultimately, though, many of the pieces are artistic works of merit and so I have the students produce two copies, one for themselves and the other for my records--or one that I keep for my records. Lately, though given the collection and the amount of work and expense involved, students who have done phenominal work that cannot be reproduced can have the work back, though I am ambivalent on this issue.

Before they proceed, they must write a contract that details the nature of the work, the dates for submission of each section (unedited copy, mock up etc.) and the final date and time that the project is due. While the contract is taken seriously by the students and the teacher, they are allowed to be humorous and the contracts talk of "death and the grade still expected" and other disasters that may befall the student and/or teacher but do not excuse either the projec tbeing due on time or the grade to be given. On a more serious level, this requirement gives them a feel for this kind of procedure e.g. working to a deadline.

The range of work is phenomenal.

Items created have included:

Brochures that explain the student's work, complete with photographs, drawings and written copy--usually in a free flowing manner, sometimes formal and sometimes informal. These brochures have likewise varied from the more standard formats to more adventuresome packets and displays.

CD Covers: designed as well as written by the artists. They can be on music that the artist has written or "concept" pieces, such as a CD on Rock'nroll music onm the theme of "America."

How to booklets on special topics. Some of these are aimed at specific audiences (Jr. High School, for example) and the language has to be checked for age appropriateness.

Brochures for an exhibit of the student's own making, complete with text and pictures.

Booklets that teach students about some aspect of Art. Again, the language has to be age appropriate.

Calendars, post cards, house designs etc. etc.

Finally, on the day that the material is due, students also have to include a one page summary of the trials and tribulations of creating such a project and inevitably the joy at the way it turned out.

Class dismissed.